

The Plumbat affair; The story of how Israel got its nukes

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1. The case of the "missing uranium."

In November 1968 the cargo ship Scheersberg A set sail from Antwerp, Belgium, bound for Genoa, Italy. She was hauling uranium which Asmara Chemie, a West German chemical company, had consigned to SAICA, an Italian paint company, for commercial processing.

She never arrived.

Two weeks after she was due at Genoa she put in instead at the eastern Turkish port of Iskenderum, her hull empty. The captain and crew abandoned her and disappeared.

The voyage of the Scheersberg A greatly preoccupied Euratom (Europe's nuclear security agency) and the intelligence services of European Commission member states and their NATO allies, including the CIA. All launched their own investigations to find out who could have absconded with the Scheersberg A's uranium cargo.

All of them drew a blank.

2. A Spy is Captured.

Then in 1973, a Mossad (Israeli spy "Institute") assassin named Dan Aerbel was captured by Norwegian police. Aerbel's hit team was on a mission for Mossad chief Zwi Zamir---authorized by Israeli PM Golda Meir's government---to hunt down and kill Black September members in revenge for the deaths of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Aerbel's death squad had confused Salameh, their intended target, with Ahmed Bouchiki, a local waiter with no connection to Black September. Bouchiki was shot to death on the street by Mossad assassins after he stepped off a bus in Lillehammer---in front of multiple witnesses who reported descriptions of the shooters and their getaway car, including the license plate number, to Lillehammer police.

Aerbel was arrested while attempting to flee Lillehammer and was interrogated for days by Inspector Ravlo of the "E-Gruppa," (Norway's equivalent of the FBI or RCMP), who passed Aerbel's confessions along to the Politiets Overvaaknightstjeneste, the Norwegian spy agency. The case of mistaken identity, Aerbel's capture and his subsequent confessions were a disaster for Zwi Zmir and Mossad.

Aerbel, facing murder conspiracy charges, admitted to being a spy only following orders, and gave his interrogators all the information he had about Mossad's operations dating back several years in Africa (including Libya), Europe, and revealed the name of the ship that carried uranium to Israel: the Scheersberg A.

3. Not allowed to have The Bomb.

Nervous of losing their 1967 military-conquests in another war, Prime Minister Golda Meir her government (including General Dayan, then paratroop commander Ariel Sharon, and later Prime-Minister and former terrorist leader Menachem Begin) were determined to obtain nuclear weapons for defense of "Greater" (Eretz) Israel. Europe had 200 tonnes of uranium oxide ("yellowcake") sitting in a silo in Belgium which Israeli nuclear scientists were ready to convert into bombs at their clandestine reactor near Dimona. Trouble was, Israel was not allowed to have uranium.

Standing in the regime's way to obtaining uranium was EURATOM, the European Economic Community's new regulatory agency tasked with monitoring the fledgling European nuclear industry. Part of Euratom's mandate is preserving the security of Europe's nuclear stocks and enforcing anti-nuclear arms proliferation treaties banning E.E.C. member states from exporting nuclear materiel to governments not allowed developing nuclear capacity---and of course Israel did not qualify.

Prohibited by Euratom from purchasing the uranium legally, Meir turned to Mossad for help in secreting the uranium out of Europe. Operation Plumbat was born. (Plumba is Latin for lead, synonymous for "uranium.")

4. "Operation Plumbat."

The German chemical company Asmara Chemie was approached to play the major role in the operation. The connection between Asmara Chemie and Mossad dates back to when Dan Aerbel spent much of 1964 recruiting contacts for Israel around the U.S. military bases near Wiesbaden, West Germany, where Asmara did business. Shulzen, the owner, was invited to Israel and as a result began providing chemicals to Israel. With Israel facing sanctions after the 1967 war, A.C. supplied decontamination kits to the IDF, and Shulzen even attempted to obtain advanced infra-red cameras for his Israeli friends.



The control room inside Israel's Dimona nuclear facility.

In 1968 Asmara Chemie applied to Euratom for approval of what appeared on the surface to be a routine proposal. Asmara wanted to buy uranium from the Belgian mineral company SGM and ship it on the Scheersberg A to Italy for harmless processing by the paint company SAICA, owned by one of Shulzen's cronies. SGM did not care much what happened to the uranium once satisfied that Asmara could pay for it. Euratom, disorganized, divided, squabbling with itself, and in the process of moving all their offices and files from one city to another, approved the Asmara-SAICA deal without much investigation. Euratom did think it a little unusual to move the uranium by ship instead of rail, but nothing came of it.

The Sheersberg A met secretly with an Israeli freighter somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the uranium was transferred at sea. The freighter then sailed the remaining distance to Israel where the uranium was unloaded and sent to Dimona for processing into weapons.

5. The truth is revealed.

The cover-up of Israel's nuclear secret remained largely intact until 1976, when the legal

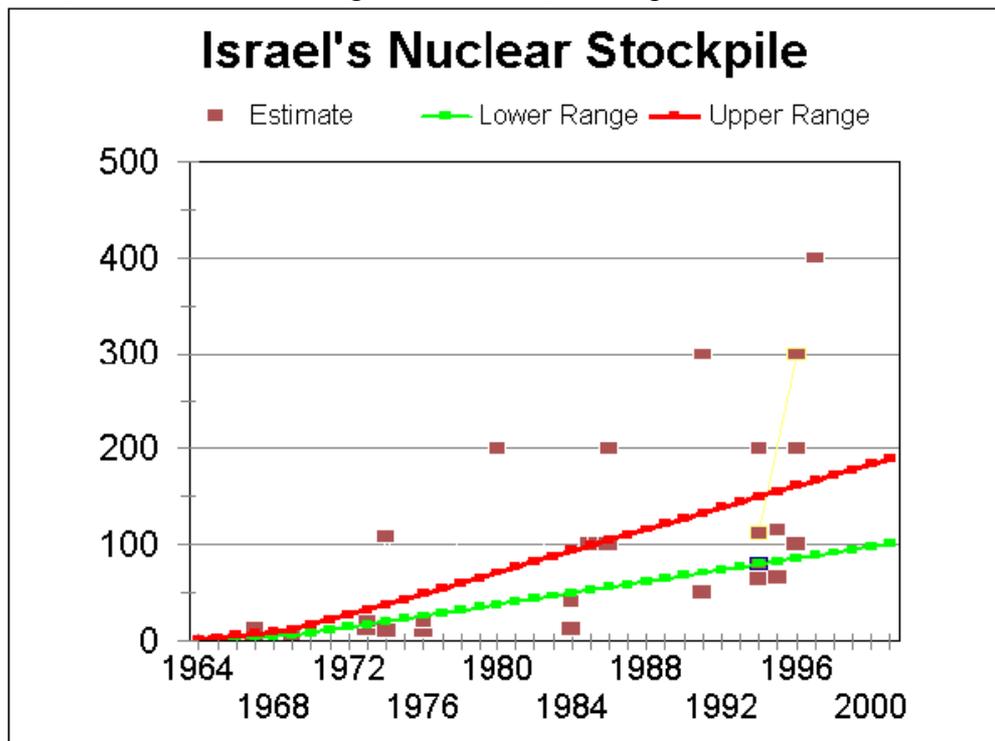
counsel to the U.S. Senate's Government Operations Committee, a man named Leventhal, became fascinated by CIA estimates stating Isreal had churned-out about three low-grade nukes by 1973. Leventhal, a passionate anti-nuclear proliferation activist, became determined to solve the mystery of how Israel had acquired the fissionable material to make the Bomb.

A key chance meeting occurred between Leventhal and the Euratom official who had approved the contract between SGM, the Belgian uranium supplier, and Asmara, the Israeli front company. Leventhal went public with this information at the antinuclear conference in Salzburg, Austria in late April 1977, and also leaked the story to the LA Times: in 1968, 200 tons of European uranium went missing and had been unloaded in Israel.

Besieged by questions from journalists, European officials in Brussels would admit only that 200 tons of uranium had been "lost" on the high seas, and the name of the uranium's buyer: Asmara Chemie.

Then Enrico Jacchia, former Euratom safeguard's director, held a press conference where he outlined the book he planned to write and gave away the operational codeword: Plumbat.

Time Magazine and Der Spiegel reported that German Chancellor Kiesinger had assured Israelis "they would be allowed to disguise their purchase of uranium as a private transaction in West Germany."



Source: Jewish Virtual Library

In 1978 The Plumbat Affair was published in the United States.

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